[redacted]

Emergency

because its more than rain that falls on our parade

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OCEAN AND THE HILLS #5

Emergency #5: The Ocean and the Hills

Introduction

Before my sister started traveling, she “practiced” sleeping on the floor, even though she had a perfectly decent bed. I thought she was insane. Then she left. I didn’t practice, but pretty soon I left too, and slept on floors for a long time. I’m still not convinced it’s a skill that requires training. Because as Otis put it, *there are years that are so good, you don’t mind waking up cramped.* He added, sour faced: *this isn’t one of those years.* This zine is about not-one-of-those-years. It’s about a long winter, the speed of camels and travelers, the Bush backlash and the trials and tribulations—as I modestly put it—of living on the cutting edge of culture. It’s about the times when you really want to be up off the cruddy floor, with a real sheet if possible. And about getting old enough to be young again so you can leave the mattress on the curb and get back on the road, again.

The zine is designed to be read in order, with the “reviews” and other “zine elements” as part of the narrative. More copies available for $2 to:

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Back issues:
Emergency #4: Monsters $2
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is one’s for the zinesters: Michelle, Tennessee, Andre Hermitt, Cindy enrack, Merrydeath, Abram, Jamie, Ethan, Natalia and Willy, John rken, Asia, Mike Antipathy, Shelley, Carolyn, Leah Vega, Chris Terry d everyone out there still making zines. Special thanks to Shanna for and heavy lifting, China for the bottle on the cover, Michelle and Asia editing and Melissa and John G. for proofreading.

Thanks for reading,

am

The Ocean and the Hills

There are two places. There are the hills and there is the sea. There are our goings and returnings, voyages and emigrations, the strong calves it takes to walk our bodies into the highlands and strong thighs required to point our toes down again. Over the backs of mountains, atop dry leaves and loose gravel, childhood, adolescence, the loss of faith and its untidy return. There are two places. There are the hills and there is the sea. We are children and teenagers in one place; we go elsewhere to become adults. We go alone. (Arriving is different than leaving.) When we arrive we aren't anyone in particular. In time, we become specific people. When we go back, to visit, we are disillusioned and sleepy, not here or there, neither us nor them. This is the entire story, everything, all of it.

* * *

Part 1: Zine

I feel like the scene in my room is some sort of mutant fantasy, some writer's trick—for showing rather than telling—the nuances of one's characters. As I stand, barking orders, the main subjects of my last zine are obediently compiling it.

I've sprained a muscle in my back so Laura—crazy drunk Laura, Laura who evaded bounty hunters while sparring with security guards, Laura of "ladies, ladies, don't smoke crack, it feels bad" fame is attempting to staple the zine I worried for a year would destroy our friendship. She averages about one staple every twelve minutes, all of them bent and dangerous, as she spouts off on various topics, arms waving, painted toenails jostling my collated piles. My fears couldn't have been more wasted. When she first read the zine a year ago—read the tales of her Robittusin induced half-naked supermarket dance party, her charming tendency towards incontinence, her ex-boyfriend-stalking and drunk driving—her eyes welled up with tears.

"This is the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me!"

I asked her if I could use her real name.

"Of course you can use my name! Ammi, you're my hero. You're like the Unabomber."

"I'll put that on the back," I replied.

"Yeah, I even liked the parts that weren't about me." She smiles generously. "Maybe you should put that on the back too."

This may have been the highest and least received compliment in the zine world. Cause nobody really likes the parts that aren't about them.

Laura's life has changed dramatically in between my first and second printing. She got pregnant, gave birth, got married, gave up drugs and heavy drinking, and acquired a mid-90's Toyota mini-van. Due to the lack of alcohol in her system, she also experienced a full flowering of the social phobia she'd been throwing drinks at for years, causing her to emit high-pitched squeaking sounds and wring her hands in groups of more than three. I dragged her to the bar when, after six months, we finally got the baby to release her one enormous and overtaxed breast (the other boob, rejected by the baby, is normal size).

"I can't," she squealed. "People!"

"You've spent half your life in bars. One drink."

Of the four people in the bar, three—including the bartender—are Laura's close friends.

"Hey Jill, I'm famous!" Laura yells. "I'm going to be in Tower Records. I'm in Punk Planet."

"You told me. Three times."

"Oh. Uhhh. Uhhhhhhh." Although Laura had never heard of Punk Planet before I showed her the excerpt from my zine they printed, I've convinced her that she and I are fundamentally spreading the gospel of Laura, whatever that is. I feel weird for the next three minutes, until she bolts from the bar, stealing the glass, and we spend the next hour sitting on the sidewalk. In the heat, with skittering waterbugs crunching the crisp, felled leaves. I feel weird because you don't brag about being in Punk Planet or for heavens sake Tower Records. Not in the bar where people used to read MRR, if they ever did read, and they don't read either now. The bar where Richard Hell and Voidoids are always playing but no one cares if you've heard of them or not. Where the bathroom graffiti says, "insanity and addiction are also traits you should cultivate," and I can't decide if it's profound or really, really annoying.

The bar/restaurant is this train wreck of a place two blocks from my house, named for the sign that was already hanging there. Otis calls it your-local-dyke-hobo-clown-neighborhood-bar but that precludes the hipster-musician-been-up-on-coke-for-three-days-and-I'm-here-to-score-Vicodin thing it also has going. Like, the food's good so who cares if the cook talks to himself about being the "god of anarchism" and has his dogs in the kitchen? The only lights are Christmas lights and Chinese lanterns. The main art is a four by three foot poster of the guy from the coffee shop who ODed on heroin, with this creepy rainbow haze around him so you always have to look up at him, then think: *there's that guy who was always at the coffee shop, now he's dead.* Every time I go in there I have some two-headed personal freak out/epiphany like *why can't I create something outside my Northeastern middle-class mind set? I should take more drugs!* Or: *at least I'm writing things instead of destroying myself with alcohol and pretending to be an artist. That guy's been here for two days!*

(The place is a 24 hour bar—something most of you don't have where you live—and I'm not kidding about that two day business. Observing the overlap between the morning ham-and-eggs-crowd and the still-drinking-at-9-am-ers always gives me a really queasy feeling—like maybe time has folded in on itself and I'm seeing something I shouldn't.)

The point is that this isn't the kind of place where someone says someone else is "in Punk Planet" and a congratulatory or even halfway coherent reaction is achieved. But where is? The bulk of Punk Planet's young readers, lounging at a show, would probably not respond to the aforementioned comment in any manner, to avoid appearing "uncool." Laura has somehow created another stunning non-sequiter, a statement to which no one can appropriately reply. Attempting to perfect the art of the faux pas, she repeats her comment—receiving blank stares or confused congratulations, directed at Laura—to several others we meet during two days of driving around in her perfect mini-van. The car is so shiny I flinch every time a punk walks by, afraid someone is going to smash it with a pipe or a 'get out yuppie' sticker.

"Can you believe I'm driving this thing? My life is so lush. Let's get mochas."

At the independent coffee house, of course. Her, ahem, husband Chet supports the family—the baby, Laura, and Laura's prodigious flavored fluids habit (which includes both a double café mocha and a banana-split flavored drive-thru daiquiri, daily)—by working as a professional trash picker.

"We're moneyed hipsters," he says proudly, his ponytail disguising a single, unintentional dreadlock. It's hard to imagine another guy with as many tattoos speaking as eloquently about Chanel coverlets and duck decoys from the 50's.

But back to my room, my characters. Writing a zine is kind of like writing a novel because, uh, they're both kind of long. But friends are people, not characters. They cannot be expected to conveniently express their most unique and remarkable qualities while assembling piles of paper. Except for these people/characters, who somehow do.

The three issues Laura compiled are splayed face up. They're unconvincingly folded and have humpbacked staples. She's no longer helping, but she has had one hand on the stapler for the last fifteen minutes. That's why she can't chase her kid, who crawls full speed towards any dangerous object, uncovered cup of liquid or electrical outlet he sees. I am chasing the baby, realigning the baby, offering the baby plush toys, which are of course no good at all.

Otis is carefully refolding Laura's zines. His copies, stapled earlier, have a perfect center-line with two flat swipes of silver. That's because he painstakingly removed any imperfect hits. Hunched over, squinting through his nine-dollar drugstore glasses. He first grumbled as he searched my room for a staple remover, then lectured me on the importance of having the right tool for the job.

"No. No I do not want a screwdriver."

His few, well-planned out copies are eclipsed by all the mangled ones knocked out by faster friends. He sits back and scowls over his coffee. People, he seems ready to say, dilute every opportunity for perfection by flooding the world with mediocrity.

Shanna is perched on a high-backed chair, watching the baby with one eye and Otis and Laura with the other. Every once in a while she makes a pithy comment about how many zine covers I "made" her print, then dutifully returns to affixing them to their inside parts. She makes me promise to be her phlebotomy guinea pig when she starts nursing school.

"What's phlebotomy?"

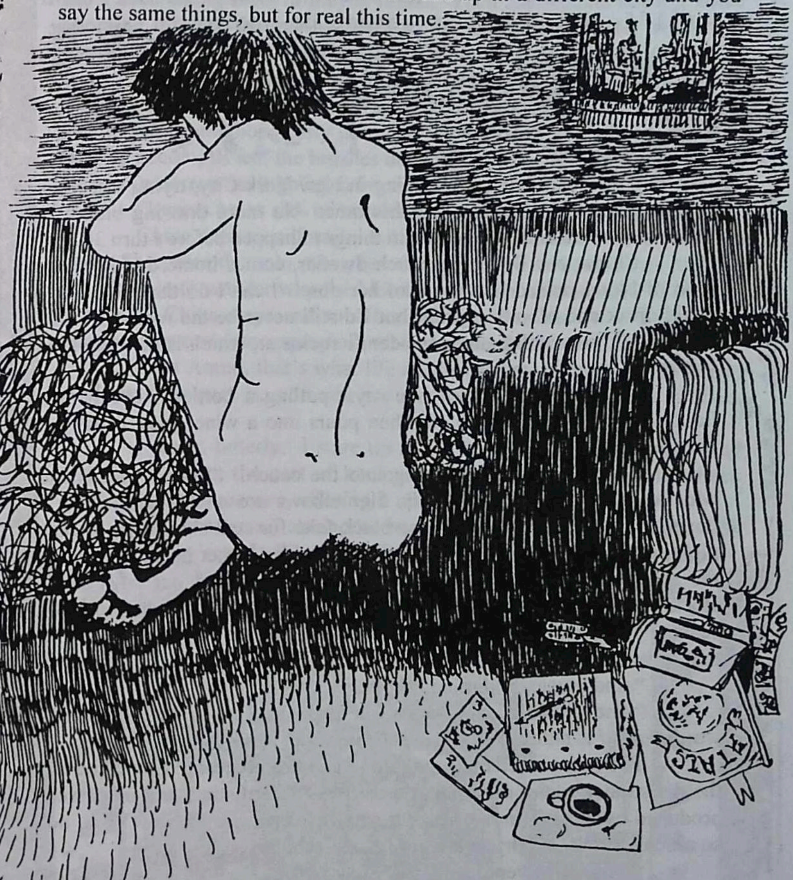
"The art of drawing blood." She has this severe, sexy librarian look going on, her hair straight and damp behind her glasses. The primness is broken by the homemade bug tattoo—more of an asterisk really—on the bony ridge behind her ear.

"Ack! What do want from me, blood?"

"Yes Ammi, I just said that." The thin line of her mouth curls into a bemused smile-smirk. "I want blood."

Fair is fair. Do any of us—the writers, the zinesters, the get up in the middle of the night and write sentences on scraps of paper people—owe anything less? Writing zines is like giving blood for practice. No real reason. Like sleeping on the floor when you have a bed, or riding your bike in a blizzard for money. No good reason at all to risk so much pain and stupidity. Except to see what it feels like. And because writing's like blood in that once it's out you can't put it back in. A puddle of bad spirits and liquid iron on the paper, and you give it away at shows.

Zine ends. Year ends. You wake up in a different city and you say the same things, but for real this time.



We go alone. Except a girl who grew up in the same hills I did ended up, like me, at the sea. I found her there and we went home together. With her, I could talk about the two halves of my life as though there was no line between them. With her, I could pretend that one thing leads to another, that discoveries and events push us down paths that have already been drawn, that the passage between altitudes is a slope rather than a cliff. Who wouldn't rather be whole?

* * *

Two years later, I am living in New York City, trying to get my shit together and do it for real this time. No more drawing blood for practice. I'm 26 and I want certain things to happen before I turn 30.

China, our Brooklyn couch dweller, comes home drunk with a drop of blood poised on the tip of her nose. I can't do that. I mean, I could drink and bloody myself, but I'd still never be the rockstar China is. A 24-7, very polite and considerate rock star, which is the only kind you really want on your couch.

"You need a drink," she says, pulling a bottle of cheap malt liquor from her bag, which she then pours into a wine glass, making it froth like champagne.

"Fuck," she says, sinking into the couch. "I don't understand why we have to do any of it." Her elbows are on her knees like a boxer's. She's wearing the same black fake fur coat she sleeps in each night, the ratty black knit cap that seems welded to her head, a slip with the tits sewn closed and the seamed stockings I find out later aren't stockings at all, but scars cut down the back of her legs to look like seams. "The only things I've ever cared about are liquor and girls, in that order. And cigarettes."

"And music." I remind her.

"And music!" She raises her glass and cocks her chin. The word *morbid* is tattooed in wide, delicate script across her jugular.

The room smells like stale food and heater steam. Or maybe it's the dehydrated plant, dying in one corner, or the distinct and oily sweat produced by stress. In any case, it smells like winter in New York, not so much a smell as a dry itch where a smell should be.

"China, I'm very sad."

I'd been trying to sleep with my face in the cat's dandruffy flank and now he rearranges himself, shocking both of us.

"You're homesick?" China reaches up and wipes her nose, then glances at the red mess on her palm. "Shit," she says, and returns her full attention to me.

"China, all I did in New Orleans was drink, stay up till 6 in the morning writing, and fuck."

Her eyes widen, lidless and gleeful.

"So why did you leave?" she intones in a stage whisper. There are long triangular shadows between her far-spaced teeth, as though she's been eating mud, or maybe blood. Then she repeats herself, voice booming through the gaping holes in our crumbling plaster walls and scaring away the cat. "AMMMMI WHHHHHY DID YOU LEAVE!?"

I always imagine trying to patch the holes. Smoothing putty and then paint over the crumbles, but even in the fantasy I know it's useless. The tools become hopelessly gummed with plaster; everything is sticky, nothing accomplished, the brushes destroyed. Why lie? Its 4 am. I can't sleep. Tomorrow isn't going to be any better.

"I guess I was sick of watching my friends deteriorate," I tell her.

China looks confused. Like she really doesn't need this last beer. She paces the cold room, her skinny body a swirl of black and red ink. I begin to wonder why the blood was *on* her nose instead of coming *out* of it. China stops and rubs her palm on her arm, where its ruddy smear disappears into a spray of tattooed cherry blossoms.

"But Ammi, that's what life *is*. It's watching people deteriorate. And the best part is, you can see it on their faces before they even begin."

I smile, bitterly. I stare up at her bony face, the teeth that may already be loose, the cast of her particular sickness. She smiles back with childlike innocence, offering it up.

"All the lines," she nods, encouraging me. "What they'll look like when they're old. What they'll look like dead. It's all right there."

They say that a soul can travel only as fast as a camel can walk in a day. We freight train riders, we hitchhikers, the faster bicyclists among us–we stay ahead of ourselves, don't we?

Sera–the girl from the hills–stayed ahead of herself, I think. Until she decided to turn around and head for home. Her soul met her body on that bridge: one leaving, the other returning, both in a fury. Clinically, they say this is a dangerous place, the bridge where mania meets depression. Anxiety and despair conjoined can move neither forward nor back. So this woman, who was two women, held her own hand and jumped. Into the river, into the bare oaks on its banks. Into the sky and the sun, into atoms and electrons, fish and bacteria. Into the molten revolving core of the planet.

Except that at the last moment, I sometimes think, maybe her soul let go of her hand and returned to wander the earth, doing what it had intended to do.

* * *

Another night, you know the kind, of writing in your head while walking. Drunk walking writing, when you understand everything, in English words, and can write it down. But there's no paper, it's never in order, and in the morning the words are still willing to talk to you but no longer to each other. Still, tonight I understand everything, and I'm ready to tell you.

China is beautiful, that is one fact. Her ex-girlfriend has written a zine about her, with a dead bat on the cover, saying she is beautiful. She stands against the old steel radiator, which hisses a silk web of steam into the air between us. The arc of her hips is inclined towards me; her sharp elbow nails me like an arrow. Outside, the snow is pocked-and dirty, the color of thirst. The black cat looks up at us with yellow eyes. Usually when people say beauty is more than skin deep they picture the excess spreading inward rather than out. But I feel hers sticking to me, an exquisite winter dampness somewhere between sweat and ice. For one thing she manages to treat me like a normal person, and even flirt with me, though I plod around most days in the same unwashed, camel colored pair of pajamas. Now that's art.

Fact two: Life is the process of dying well. A challenge. China looks at a recent picture her ex sent with the zine.

"She looks old," she says plainly. I see it, around the eyes. Also, in the mirror, those same lines.

But that's what life is, remember? A challenge. I don't even say it.

It's dying with your lover.

It's dying alone.

China and I blink together, a sort of mute agreement. There is a smashed jar on the kitchen floor, with its unspoken proximity of danger and ripe pain. I sense us both failing sometimes, as we avoid rather than dispose of the frequently dropped bottles, the nearly-invisible sprays of splintery glass. Some nights we're doing it all wrong. Some nights the great loves of our lives are moving away from us or us from them. Loneliness is a territory. Both of us are capable of crossing it, because we're ridiculously strong, stronger than anyone probably should be. But what's on the other side? I see long shifts of sand, an airplane writing white smoke across the sky. I think of my soul riding a camel, the words meaningless to a traveler on the ground. I think that we all eventually get what we're looking for, but the reason we went looking evaporates with the prize. I thought The Matrix was deep when it talked about how we know what we're looking for but not why. It takes me years sometimes, to realize why I made the simplest of choices.

I feel like I'm allowed to write about China, because someone else already has. Using her full name, her picture, her politically motivated acts of sabotage and the raw pain of being in love with her. It's a strange disconnect: seeing someone completely deserving of devotion and feeling such pity for the person fated to give it. I feel lucky that each of my housemates is a housemate and not a crush.

Because they're devils, each of them. Bad people who look good.

We talk about it all the time.

"Damn we're a good looking lot." "Whatta bunch of heartbreakers."

Modesty is for people with more time and more money. So we're devils, except me. I'm not a devil, I'm the nice one. And then there's the church downstairs.

The church meets every Sunday on the first floor of our house, all Sunday. And on Wednesdays, and Saturdays and sometimes most of the days in between. With the aid of the post demonic sounding PA, the pastor takes the congregation—which sometimes numbers a whopping six people—through a thunderous sermon, singing then shouting in undulating arcs like a car alarm designed to vary just as its whine becomes ordinary. The service ebbs and flows like hours of cleansing sex. Upstairs, at my writing desk, I feel unclean and exhausted. I hear people catching the spirit and I wonder sometimes if it'll catch me too, or at least work its way into my stories.

The whole thing might seem exotic and fascinating except that—PRAISE JESUS!—the choir is completely tone deaf. There is one woman whose beluga call of an alto has been moo-ing through my Sundays for months. But at least I don't have to sit next to her. I bet—GOD IS GREAT!—that at least someone down there has entertained very un-Christian fantasies of silencing her forever. Since there's no way they can hear anything but the PA in that room anyway, we blast Johnny Cash hymns to cover the monotonous vibrations, the shrieks and exclamations.

We particularly like, "When the Man Comes Around," which also brings the full-on apocalypse in with it, albeit in a more pleasantly on-key way than the choir downstairs has ever seemed capable of.

This morning a woman caught the spirit around 10 am and began rhythmically slamming the heavy sliding church door that's directly beneath my room. My bed shook and I woke up stiff as a board.

THE MAN HAS COME, I thought. JESUS!

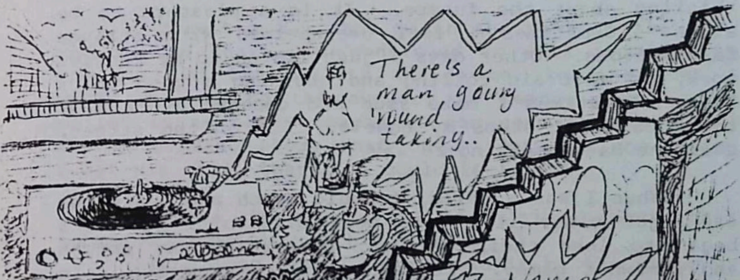
But it was someone else finding *Jesus!* and I fell back asleep like I always do. The noise of the church has the exact pitch and timbre of my housemate's S&M sex howls. I think God really is in the details. At all hours, I can expect to dream of sacred exchange.

In this lies the promise of New York City, the reasons to move and live here, broke and overstimulated. The promise of being woken up at all hours, co-existing with people very different than you and being surrounded by a metropolis packed with individuals who not only value but demand these things. We make fun of the church but would never mess with the church. In return, the churchgoers know we're a bunch of weird mostly-white queers, with our girlfriends and our tattoos and our booze. And they never try to convert us.

So—PRAISE JESUS!—I try to appreciate the non-clash of cultures. Though the novelty has worn off, I expect that in the future this is the sort of 'culture' we can all expect to live without. Once gentrification of the urban US is complete, I expect we'll all live in boxy white apartments, segregated by race, economic strata and religion. This future is already here, of course. It's everywhere. Except that right now I live in Brooklyn, the old Brooklyn. I live in 1992, and I like it here. When the house goes, I go. I don't plan on being part of the new economy.

When I go to buy eggs in the morning, I tip-toe down the creaky wood stairs—or clobber if the sermon is particularly patriarchal—and steal a quick glance as I pass the church's door. And for that second I almost get it. The crisp dresses, so clean and white they scream light. The ancient women in pillbox hats. The pastor's booming voice and wild eyes, his dark suit. The four year olds in formal wear. The stained glass of the old house vibrates along with the floor and the old women stand with their hands held up. I know church is the best thing that happens all week for some people, and without jealously or condescension, I know why.

Upstairs, we go on fucking and breaking glass and telling terrible stories.


There's a man going 'round taking..
Names. There's A MAN GOING 'ROUND

The Ocean and the Hills: New Orleans, Louisiana

We are going to war tonight. My country is the big country. I am sitting in a brightly lit room with thin, uninsulated walls. We do not have heat. We do not have medical care, meaning we cannot afford to track our cancers. To get preventive care for our genitals or our hearts. Sometimes our food is nutritive but sometimes we make do with alcohol, as is reasonable at some times and in some places. The climate is hard on the skin.

I am not complaining. I just want you to know where this story comes from. I am lucky because the war is not in my country, but in the little country far away. I am lucky because I am in love at war time and this time my lover is a man, so if they force us to marry it is possible. They aren't forcing anyone but they are starting to offer incentives, otherwise known as threats.

We are going to war tonight. My country is the big country. I am writing a story with cold hands, in a room that is bright and adequate, and I am thinking about the future. It is a pleasure to be alive. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed with strange fascinations. Other days I just listen to my muscles work, or my brain roiling and churning a good thick book. Sometimes I make soup and greens, other days too much toast stops my bowels. Out on the street, everyone has something to say.

When I was a child, I could touch and taste but as I got older it became more difficult. Objects began to lose their texture. Everything was smooth and somewhat gamey. It was not my imagination. It was the suburbs. Every substance felt the same and I could not distinguish soft from sticky, honey from brine, until I had gone to a place where these distinctions had consequence. It suits me here, and I appreciate these textures, these temperatures, daily. When I think of the bright and warm rooms of my adolescence, I am filled with a fear beyond the textures themselves, beyond the promise they offered and the monsters they hid in plain view.

A few years ago, I was able to change the circumstances of my life and became very enchanted with the result. I was very open, as young people can be, and made charmed conversation with promising strangers. Now that I am older, I have more skills but less energy. I now believe anything is possible, but also that it is no longer probable. I would like to admit my outright fear of adulthood. A state that seams glamorous, but still not fun. I do not want my body to settle in the forehead, cheeks and hips. I don't want the possibility but improbability of my life to be read instantly by children and eccentrics. I don't mind the wrinkles, but I want to keep a bit of a twitch. An incomplete, unhinged part that threatens to break off and become another person at any time, like a teenager shuddering in her sleep. This is the unfinished part, the ugly frightened mistake that refuses to relinquish itself again and again despite pain of discovery and death. Because – as you may already know – our horrors are also the holes through which we escape, the original impetus for the flight that freed us from all the larger and less dense horrors we never imagined ourselves to be trapped inside.

I dreamt a man shot me in the back of the head and in the heart. I continued to walk around with the feel of the bullets inside me, knowing that I would die during the surgery to remove them. The bullet in my head – maybe it had gone through me, I wasn't worried about that one. But the one by my heart was still there. I could feel it.

I have known for a long time about this submerged something within myself.

For a long time I have known it by the shape my own organs are pushed to around it.

For a long time I have known that I have a shape inside me where something else lives.

For a long time I have known that I will know only shapes and shadows, never the physical presence, never the truth of my person.

There is constant traffic between desires.

I know the shape and position of the thing that hurts, but I am not going to take it out. Someone else could kill me by removing it or I could kill myself with it, by living. I cannot track my cancer. Instead, I should live off this raw wound with the energy of someone whose own death has located and is following them. I should feed off this thing until I learn in the last moments of life its basic chemistry. I am sure it will be simple, as pain is simple. Regular, as cruelty is regular. Common, as the fate of the world is common, so common it has been foretold.

There is constant traffic between desires.

The Hills 1986-93

The streets have no sidewalks in the suburbs. In the town with the church steeples, town hall, the bakery and the toy store, I walked in the street. Past the hairdressers and the bagel shop, the mattress store whose window display remained the same throughout my childhood and adolescence. The town was in transition, trapped between one era and the next.

One business made Italian cookies, the next sold hardware or pizza or gold and silver jewelry. There was no longer a butcher shop; people bought their meat at the supermarket. But for greeting cards you'd go to one of the two shops lined entirely with fragile figurines, their owners watching your childish fingers from above tortoise shell bifocals. A CVS had just opened but we didn't know what they sold there yet.

Years later even my imagination recoils at what was my daily life for nearly two decades. To simply imagine waking up, attending school, dealing with the afternoon, dinner and bedtime, fills me with a dread more profound than any hallucination of violence or abandonment. What could possibly have been so bad? Try as I might, I can't touch the spot that hurts. I was numb during so much of my childhood, I think. Numb with the unmentionable understanding that nothing would ever be as good as I could imagine it being. Despite what it sounds like, I wasn't a spoiled girl. What could I do? I gave up, tried to make friends and grades, dreamed of college scholarships while enjoying television, chocolate and boy bands.

The rest of my life fanned out in front of me. I looked to examples from my family and class, weighed options and rewards. I saw the work I would most likely end up doing—40-50 hours of it a week in some office, as much for social identity as for pure survival. Despite what it sounds like, I wasn't a spoiled girl. What could I do? I gave up, made friends and grades, joined sports and clubs, worked and applied to college. There was nothing else. Even suicide requires intellectual courage.

I spent hours on the cliff above the parkway, contemplating whether or not to smoke cigarettes or jump off. I never did either. I would then come home and make dinner for my parents and sister. Macaroni and hot dogs; breasts of chicken and baked potatoes. I read all the time but the years did not pass quickly. I didn't believe I could change things or make the world better because I had never seen it change. I didn't see myself as deserving of beauty or powerful tensions because I knew only a beauty devoid of tension, that looked nothing like my body or heart. I wish I could say I was one of those kids who never fit, whose voice split the seams.

But I fit just fine.

Awkwardly, but fine. And so I put my efforts, as most teenage girls do, into trying to fit into smaller-sized clothing. It wasn't fair. Although I bought makeup and beauty magazines religiously from the new CVS, no matter what I did my body refused to become a commodity. Which is necessary for survival in suburbia, for navigating a maze of stores in which each and every body at some point becomes the object of contemplation, desire and purchase. The slut, cheerleader, the girl next door. No one bought me, and eventually I took down the "for sale" sign and became my own person. But how? To look favorably on one's body in the world of middle class white teenage girls is near blasphemy. Despite being the nearest approximation of the dominant beauty standard in terms of race, class and especially age, middle class white girls always feel the farthest from honest desirability.

Because everyone knows we're after power, not pleasure. That our sex has nothing to do with real wanting, terror or joy. That it has everything to do with scoring the captain of the football team or, later, a new washer and dryer. That sexuality for middle class women is about holding onto class privilege by not sharing one's body with the wrong person. About cashing in on a birth right that guarantees certain women a life free from fear and physical labor. This is how a body becomes more about what it represents than what it feels, more about how it looks in a certain car than what it can do with some of the strongest legs in the animal kingdom. This is how society assigns value and, in time, how we come to value ourselves. Almost by definition, we cannot touch the spot that hurts.

My girl, the one who died, stayed afloat during my period of hibernation. Stayed awake, got into hair-dying and crust punk in the town with so few sidewalks. It must have been painful but I'm still so jealous. For those years of being a teenager, that time when you can, you really can, make so many mistakes. My life has been easy. I haven't often been afraid. But I'm scared, so scared, of those years I spent submerged. The fog I lived in is routine, not even really worth describing. What's odd is the random twist by which I made it out.

My girl was never going to lead a dead life. But I was. What scares me the most is, I still could.

A MOVIE REVIEW:

Shanna and I went to visit Mike and Donna in California, where we watched a great many movies about people being stalked by death. We would pile Donna and Mike's laundry on top of us in the backseat of their hatchback, then hold our breath and turn up the radio while they paid two fares, exhaling as the car arranged itself for the double feature. We'd have a big bucket of popcorn and an even bigger piss cup, which over the course of the movie expunged a steady and easily identifiable stream beginning below the passenger window and extending downhill around the back tires.

Two of these films, The Ring and Final Destination 2, were about people whose own death has located them and informed them of its estimated time of arrival. Though both movies take place over a span of days, what struck me is that in these scenarios, the protagonists knew not only when they would be killed, but when they could not. If watching a video tape will kill you exactly seven days later (The Ring), you cannot get grabbed on day 3, 5 or 6. That's oddly comforting, oddly chilling. Similarly, the impulsive motorcyclist of Final Destination 2, upon realizing that he cannot be taken until another character is, puts a gun to his head. He pulls the trigger repeatedly but the bullets won't fire.

In these horror movies, death is scary not for its unpredictability, but its promptness, its bureaucratic insistence on efficiency above human values. But bureaucracy is less scary than *the void*. Going to the DMV to kick off would be preferable, in my opinion, to getting taken before making amends or finishing the work each of us have started here. I would like to know when I am going to die, absolutely. Not knowing is half the terror. But the only way to be sure in the non-movie universe is to commit suicide. If you decide to off yourself at noon, you cannot (almost literally) die at 9 am.

Mike and I met because of the girl who grew up in the hills, and we were at the sea together for the one year anniversary of her suicide. We went to see movies about the inevitability of violent death, and reflected on what—with the passage of time—has begun to seem more and more inevitable. Not only like it has happened. But like it was always going to. It becomes harder and harder—with the tribute zines (mine included), art, eulogy and poetry about this girl—to understand that Sera was once a kid like us with a full future. That death wasn't always coming for her. She makes such a beautiful symbol of something that shouldn't have happened.

It gets harder and harder to hear her voice in my head. In my fantasies, she stares back at me but can't talk. A year ago, she could talk. Reality shifts, memories crumble like wet sand. We try to write them down but the pages shuffle and the words change meaning. It is impossible to seize a moment: the smell and impression of one's physical responses, the spin of the nightly news, the small forest of signs that create our experience of being small and lost inside history.

I have dreamed whole lives that made much more sense than this one. In the months after Sera's death, I dreamed a whole history of her and of me; I understood everything. There were these lines of shared pain, my exact secrets and hers embracing like the moment of revelation at the end of a good novel. I dreamed a universe of her and me but I had to let it go, I'm poorer for it, as Sera refused to be. People like us—like you and I—can only look at the truth ("everything, everything," Sera's favorite word) through slit eyes. We're artists, so we let a little in between our fingers, and do what we can with it.

We were coming into the harbor on Mike's boat a few days after the movies when an ambulance motorboat overtook us. There was a surfer lying crumpled on its floor. A woman? The body was exceptionally small, without identifiable wounds. She was wearing a yellow wetsuit but it was hard to focus on her visually. You can't see dead people, really. Their bodies give off a psychic fire that makes your vision crumple and your memory skip like a record. So she might not have been a she at all. After the paramedics and coast guard passed us, something changed. They turned off the sirens and floated silently towards the dock.

But let's be plain. About the girl from the hills. Because her life wasn't composed of images and ideas. Of smells that pass like silk, their chemistry unknown. It wasn't about dreams and angels, but people steeped in pheromones and frost. The stinging winter stench of underarms and necks, nostrils bitten with snow and the icy rush of betrayal that you can tell instantly is not a living thing. Two years later I still wonder what it must be like to arrange one's feet carefully on the paper-thin line between life and death, all the while surrounded by roasting pie crusts, oily cords of hair, the fury of drums and the beating of sure, jealous hearts. What is it like to be both a sensualist and a ghost? She smiled, my girl, at the things that are here now and won't be later. Too often, she found herself among their incorporeal ranks.

The Ocean: New Orleans, Louisiana 2002

One morning I wake up, very suddenly, inside a life. This house, this hairstyle, this hole in my skirt. It is a sensual reawakening, like tunneling out of a giant peach. The dirty linoleum floor is stuck to my feet; shredded around the leg of a bruised piano. There are piles of sheet music on the table, good books, fresh sloppy paint glistening over the old trim.

I found myself here, this sudden woman, with her cast iron skillet and spongy socks. Lemon and lime, ginger and garlic, sage, cumin and comforting puddles of oil: this is how I cook. With puffed up grains in hot covered pots, cheap beans in gold cans, bits of shriveled greens clinging to the blackened metal. The meals taste salty and ferrous, while rain enters through the rotting window frame and mice swim in the weak wall behind the stove. All I know is that this is my house and not someone else's. These are my bones and my vagina.

It may be an imperfect life but for the first time in 25 years, I'm actually inside it, like the pit at the center of the room. I woke up here. Nothing happened to bring me here. I began and I ended and began again. These are still my bones and not someone else's. This is the place where I live.

AN HBO REVIEW:

Back on Greene Street in Brooklyn, we make plans to watch Angels in America, the acclaimed mini-series, but we can never seem to get it together. Because our kitchen table is covered with writing and wine bottles, advanced readers copies of corporate publishing company novels that we get for free and trash-on, junk mail and maps of continents we've never been. I got *Angels in America Part 1*, the book, for 79 cents at Goodwill. When Tennessee broke up with his girlfriend, I cried.

"Now I'll never get to read part II!" The girlfriend had it. We're that kind of people, busy, our senses burned with good living. We listen to our upstairs' neighbors CDs and write all night.

"Dude, Stephanie is like Rimbaud," I point out. Stephanie is our upstairs neighbor. She's all normal and flighty. Then she sings these songs that reveal the absolute nakedness of the human heart.

"Dude, I know. This song is amazing."

I'd rather get shot out of love, like Rimbaud, then go out as a blood smear on the fender of a SUV. Or maybe I could just be loved like a gunshot through the arm—not life threatening but painful enough to make a person see JESUS. Stephanie comes downstairs in boxer briefs and asks to use the shower. I eat the chocolate chip cookies she gets from work and she assures me that it's *fine, fine, really she can get more*. I never tell her that her music stuns me. Stephanie and I watch America's Top Model on reality TV and invent a contest just for us: America's Top Mustache. We're that kind of people.

We get in a several-months-long, debilitating fight with upstairs, with Stephanie and her roommate. Midway through it, Tennessee gets all of Stephanie's band's CDs from his room and we listen for hours. We bitch them out for stealing our cumin. We never tell them—Stephanie nor Emily—that their voices are in our heads and our unfinished novels. We're that kind of people.

China comes home and re-reads the zine her ex wrote. Someone breaks a wine glass and we find its shards in our feet the next morning. The Flannery O' Conner book is bleeding pages dry as sand onto the coffee table; the neck of the whiskey bottle is as thick as a person's wrist. I tap my foot to *When the Man Comes Around* and there's a chorus of angel's voices, which turns out to be beer bottles clinking between my feet on the uneven floor. The heat is hit or miss and when drifts upstairs, along with the sprit of JESUS, we've hit jackpot. I read poems out of stolen literary magazines and China reads lesbian erotica aloud, laughing like a horse. After we spill salt on the book's cover, its naked bodies start to look erotic, like sweat and drugs and religious exhaustion.

I heard Angels in America was amazing.

A MUSIC REVIEW:

Tennessee asked me why I do drag. We were sitting in the smoky purple bar with the gold painted toilets, an early 90's metal video compilation playing on the enormous TV. We had just escaped "the hottest alternative dance club in the arigny," where we'd gone to catch a drag show. The place was all xpensive drinks, neon rainbows and gender clichés. Tennessee said he place made him feel like he was surrounded by straight people retending to be gay.

Why do I do drag? I thought it was a good question.

"You know how you can't say 'a rose is beautiful'? It's a cliché." But a rose really is beautiful. Just because you can't say it doesn't mean it doesn't thrill you. Gender is like a rose that way. It's this phenomenally important part of each person's search for identity, and yet it's too big to talk about. It's everywhere. Broad and deep. Cuts, like a knife. See, another cliché.

Tennessee nodded. "Dude, I looove this song."

I glanced up at the computer enhanced motorcycle scene, Judas Priest past their prime.

"Drag shows are a place where you can say 'a rose is beautiful' and the audience will cheer." I do drag because it allows me to create something vital to who I am while at the same time being a total cheese ball. You can be sappy, silly or melodramatic while doing drag because no matter how you dress it up, you're still making a profound comment on the human spirit and our society. The rose is also a loaded gun.

We sit for a long time not talking, the weight of these two things which are really one flattening our voices.

I should back up a little, which people do when 1) they need to reveal something complicated and difficult. 2) When they are buying time.

First, the drag shows. We've been doing them every few months in New Orleans for a while—we being whoever feels like it each show. FeMale Trouble was the king group who introduced me and lots of others in this city to drag. All City Drag Night was our all-gender spin off. A few shows later this morphed into Uncensored Drag Nation and our last show was a 'Deviant Cabaret' to allow even more variety. There's talk of the next one being All Species Drag Night, to allow more room for animal drag, plant sex and the post-human among us. Gender, you know, is everything.

At our Halloween show I did "I'm On Fire" by Bruce Springsteen as a werewolf singing to the moon. A beautiful transwoman moved across the stage in shimmery silver with a cardboard moon face, taunting me while I reached for her in my Goosebumps-brand monster slippers, crooning, *you cool my desire.* Gender, you know, is everything—

including making cheesy children's slippers (along with a badly maintained dreadlock hairstyle) into an emblem of monsterhood and transformation. When we practiced the act for the moon's roommate, he kept going on about how she epitomized the character because she's so feminine and everyone knows the moon is female. Well, yes. Alana's ethereal femininity—her high cheekbones, understated poise and dancer's gait—were the reason's I asked her to join the skit, but I wanted more than a simple moon equals woman equation. Because the moon isn't male, but it isn't female either. It's moon-gendered, and though Alana's roommate wasn't seeing it, that's what she was presenting. As for my character, I took the roommate's other idea and ripped open my shirt at the last howl, revealing a set of breasts with fur pasties and plenty of chest hair. It turns out I was a dyke trapped inside a werewolf trapped inside a man's body. Who knew?

Did you get all that? The point is: gender is a journey. You never know what's inside, you never know what comes next. After the act Insa, who is intersexed, came up to me to tell me ze liked it.

"Yeah," I said dorkily, "I did it cause I'm obsessed with gender and monsters."

Insa smiled this insane smile and I suddenly remembered ze had fangs, filed down to frame hir straight white incisors.

"HELLOOO! Now who do you think you are talking to!?"

Gender and monsters, of course. I'd forgotten, if I'd ever known, the depth of Insa's obsession with these two things. Later I went on the internet—to genderfreenation.org, and read a piece ze wrote about growing up. About feeling like a monster and having this confirmed by doctors. About feeling sexy for the first time while exploring goth culture while courting its sexually ambiguous vampire mystique. Talking to Insa that night reminded me that gender isn't just a personal journey. moves across and between us, infecting and reviving. In friendship an in love, gender is us becoming each other.

I don't want to sound like I'm bragging about the drag shows m friends and I do, but I'm terribly proud. I know they won't last forever, b for now they are a revelation. In one show Patrick was a daisy-duke cla country girl doing a Peaches song live on a banjo. To the bartende Who, being Michelle, climbed up on the bar to sing back 'Beast Burden' while a punk band in their gender-bending finest played backu We've had Shanna as a George Bush vampire shrieking Screamin' J Hawkins "I Put a Spell on You" to a woman-shaped globe. She then into the crotch, which was geographically the Middle East, spewing fa blood all over the region. We had Matt Runkle, better known for zines than his cherubic Shirley Temple, smashing a cardboard city wit giant lollipop to a Melt Banana song. We've had Burt and E spooning, a full on Chicago-style cabaret dance routine, as well as ple of artful, sexy and sometimes more traditional queen and king numbe

After the last show, I was bitching about certain stressful logistics. Michelle told me I was missing the point.

"Sure it's annoying when someone forgets they need an extension cord or leaves props on stage, but try to see the bigger picture. We broke things down at this show, even more than before. We had bearded drag queens and kings with their tits hanging out. Think about what this all means."

My head spun. She was right. Indeed Kenny was such a high-femme superstar that Miss Myra—the cook at the restaurant downstairs, where I also work—came up to catch part of the show and could not be convinced later that he was male.

"Playin' with the cat and everything!" She shrieked, referring to his, "When I Think About You I Touch Myself" routine. As for the full bushy beard, the way he moved and padded his body beneath the dress had simply overridden this highly coded signal. Because the shows are generally three bucks for those in drag (whatever that means to you), most of the audience is dressed the opposite of how I'm used to seeing them. With each show, we're getting closer and closer to creating a space where people can't determine each other's genders and, better yet, have stopped trying. For reasons I can't explain but will try to in a moment, they are the only spaces where I've ever felt truly comfortable.

But first, I'd like to say something about my breathing right now. And yours.

Notice it.

Discussions of gender are deterritorializing. Meaning that afterwards you don't know where you are anymore. Books and zines that ask people to question their commitment to society's concept of gender often have breaks in which they order the reader to put the book down and do something else. What I'm trying to say is: it's ok if your head is spinning, spinning. Who we are is both our strength and the point at which we are capable of becoming brittle and splitting clean open. Who we are is deeply connected to the genders we've been assigned and to those we identify as. In this society, there is no escape route. You try to speak around gender, you try to speak your first soul. But gender is the language you have been given and gender is the audience that hears, the social world that validates you as a human animal. So you speak in lies and clichés, and in doing so approach the truth. Questioning gender is, for many if not all of us, a journey back.

We live in amazing times. We live in a bloody century. So much has changed and so much won't ever change. There are splits and breakdowns because of this stuff. There are murders. People throughout time have killed to acquire sacred knowledge, and they have killed to stop its spread. In this century, gender is the secret. We seek and find our relationship to it, but slowly, knowing how much it will hurt and blind us when we do. We're seekers so we let a little bit in, through slit eyes, and do what we can with it.

The Ocean and the Hills, Part II

I wake up sweating, sure the war has started. It does start, but on another night, and there is nothing to do on this one at four in the morning but make tea with lemon and wait for the bombs. I know I might be waiting weeks, but what does it matter?

The war comes. Other things, harder to name, come. Still, the future is always refreshing, wind that glides between skin and bone, drying the cold sweat on the forehead of the present. This is who we are. These are the people we must climb out of.

Where were you when the war began? What did you do? Were you able to articulate a vision? Were you even able to see?

I want – with my tea and lemon – to talk about how tragedy demands art, then rejects it. How badly we want to respond, how lovingly we seek to add our voices, and how crudely those efforts are refused.

I sit at four am, waiting for the bombs and contemplating what I won't be losing. No husband or wife, children or pets have I to lose. I am smart and safe. People have lost their husbands, wives, children, pets. Sometimes one bomb did it all. I live in the big country. I have nothing to lose.

It is four am. The bombs haven't interrupted the infomercials. I am wearing a flannel bathrobe and shaking inside my shell of skin, this outside part I am slowly coming to believe is real. I move my pen because I can't move my legs. Why must we always stake everything on one muscle? It's a long night. Four am and no bombs to mourn. I think about my lover and all the people I might have grown into but haven't. As though I gave all of these other people away in exchange for the single being he could love fiercely and terribly. I sense this hole inside myself where all those people used to live, can lick it like the gap where a tooth used to be.

The taste of blood. The sun coming up. The sense of bombs coming from the West, like rain that won't arrive. I climb back into bed beside my lover, which is in itself a small miracle, and resolve to check the television when I wake up.

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A BOOK REVIEW:

Reviewed here: The Black Album by Hanif Kureishi and The Wind Up Bird Chronicle by Haruki Murakami

I don't know how authors collect the strength to write about historical moments. About times ripe with possibility now passed into confusion. Can I say that the death of politics equals the death of love? Because it does. I mean, it seems possible to write about movements whose time has past, or to continue to live them as though they are still a force in the present. But not both. Not at the same time.

In *The Black Album*, Hanif Kureishi takes on 1989. From the perspective of a Pakistani-English community college student who becomes friends with Islamic fundamentalist kids while falling for his very secular pop-culture professor. The conflict for Kureishi's narrator comes to a head around the fatwa against Salmon Rushdie and the fall of the Berlin wall. Kureishi's narrator—who loves Prince—must ultimately chose between his friends and his lover; his race/community and his own art. It's a powerful and extremely funny (note: the importance of humor!) novel, in which the political climate compels the main character to change and grow up, rather than supplanting him as the focus.

And though I think Kureishi's brilliant, there's a chaos to the book—to the time period—that makes me feel hopeless. Nothing is ever going to be centered again, not really. Storytelling has become and will be from now on a balancing act. The character's feelings about racism, for example, must share space with his discomfort around both his assimilationist family and the students who tell it like it is but hate Prince. Where to start? In this world of interconnected— but not interlocking—fragments, we can expect pieces of ourselves and pieces of history to touch but never mesh. And why write a truth that can never go home again?

I've often felt like I've been at home, in some slice of this imperfect subculture we call punk. But my cynicism puts me farther and farther away from the kids donating their time, their dumpstered and DIY store of energy and enthusiasm. We fall in love as believers and when we fall out again we're nobody. Across each decade there are people who forgo fear in the face of a desire for something better. But at some point most of us discover fear again, and are faced with an accumulation of loss.

Falling out of love with our beliefs, our assurances, is treacherous. We fall through stiff brambles, hard water. This fall is narrow, entirely through the slim hole of our own personal horror. This fall is a nightmare, a birth.

I decided I wanted an easy life. I stopped going to Food Not Bombs and volunteering at the bike collective and talking about difficult subjects at work. I felt I lacked both the anger and beauty of my friends. Also their vanity, their arrogance and strength of character. I sat around with old friends, anarchist drop-outs like me and we wondered:

If you meet people because you're all vegetarians, and then you stop being vegetarian, what are you?

What do we call ourselves? What do we eat now?

The Hills, 1994-1998

"We are," China warns, "most people's vision of hell. I mean, they vote for George Bush because they're afraid of ending up like us."

Us. What we are. What we do. We get up in the morning, like other people. Sometimes we go to jobs. Otherwise we say, "I'm going to write."

"I'm going to paint today." "I'm going to practice guitar."

Other times we ride bikes around the city, work on circus acts, read Bukowski out loud over coffee with whiskey, then just whiskey. We're trying to find a use for ourselves in a world that isn't particularly interested. From New York City we can take over the world, buts it's hard enough just riding the subway. Because when you try to entertain New Yorkers, they won't give you their eyes for a second. Then, when you're tired of being you, and they're tired of being them, they stare you down. Most people—I think during those short, sad winter days—hate their lives 80% of the time and there is no art, no novel, no movie that is going to change that.

I feel sometimes like I'm in the shower trying to turn on the hot water. Trying to be part of some revolution, some change of ideas, a churning, an ending, a beginning. I'm trying to turn on the hot water but all I can open up is a lukewarm rush, a valve that allows release without the energy. I like rock and roll. I like movies, sure. But I can't get clean here. Books, zines, great. But aren't you still, like me, waiting for that thing you've been expecting your whole life but can't name? For the world to shiver and shatter and for you, finally, to have a place in whatever is left?

Things are different than they were just a few years ago. We're different. My eccentric sister has moved into a punk house in East Williamsburg. I stay over one night, wake up in the bed of a woman I met years ago, who is out of town. This woman wears dark red lipstick and IWW buttons. I've always admired her from afar, been almost-friends with her so long it's as if we actually were friends. I seem to run into her at all my crucial junctures in NY: leaving, arriving, leaving again.

This morning, I wake up in her red room and the house is sad. When I first got involved with this scene of people, this house felt like an important place. This red room used to belong to someone I thought of as a serious artist, a serious activist. Maybe Eric—its first occupant—was just seriously mysterious, in a way that can be a gift to all of us who are less so. I remember one day how a catatonic homeless woman who cooked Food Not Bombs with us cornered him, in a fit of mute romantic attraction, behind the stove in the kitchen. Being mysterious and disliking conflict, Eric simply climbed out the window behind the stove, slaked across the narrow ledge and stepped in again through the living room window.

Like that woman, I sensed there was something peculiar to be unearthed there. I didn't have a crush on him, but I did take particular note of what records were out in his room. All the house's inhabitants listened to interesting records. They had an anti-oppression analysis and knew how to cook borsht. Their living room was composed of found furniture, the walls decorated with stencil art featuring agitators and animals. It was the first house I'd seen that looked like that. Tools that smelled like motor oil on the coffee table, bills stacked neatly and paid collectively.

The house looks the same, but it isn't the same. The activists have mostly left. There are some college students now, nothing wrong with that. But most people are too busy or too hopeless or too smart to try to change the world right now. Most people I know have gone on to 'real' jobs, slacker abstentia or small town baby-making. Or they're new and don't know the rules yet.

The rules are how we live. How we have to live in order to be amazing. The rules relate to the simple formula that low living expenses—primarily low or no rent—can when combined with hope and goodwill result in good art and good trouble. High living expenses result in long workweeks, equaling rushed, product-oriented art and more orthodox forms of trouble.

We can play another game, with other rules, but it won't ever be as good as what we had. As who we were. You can't go back. You have to go back. You can't go forward because the future isn't here yet. But my hands are itching to make something beautiful. I'm itching to meet my people under a dark sky and to know them by their smell.

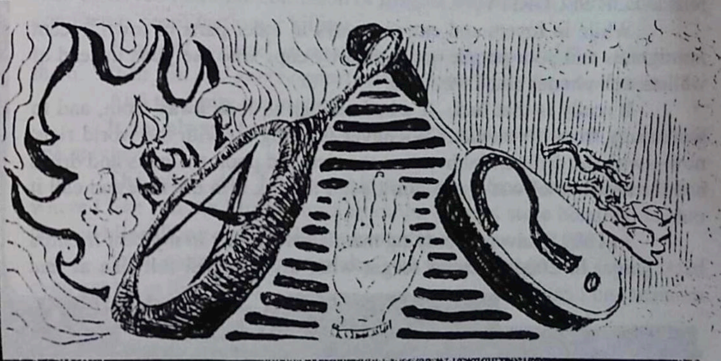
"Who are we now?" Tennessee asks.

"We're lapsed vegetarians." It is the best I can do.

Every day is a choice.

I like to believe every day isn't a choice, because I believe choices can hurt. I like to think you can rearrange the living room, stain your best pants in the worst possible place, destroy a friendship, ruin a perfectly good bone while it's still inside you. The suburbs are very hard to destroy, hard even to soil. Cleaned, bolted, shellacked and then gone over with antibacterial soap and pine scented cleaners. When you come from a place like this, you don't believe anything can happen to anyone, ever, least of all to you. Your flesh is clean and not wholly your own. You want things you shouldn't know about.

When I first started traveling, I made lists of the objects on a person's desk, on the kitchen table. I was looking for specific markers of what was important, so I could find it again. It seems silly now, but I was terrified to lose the trail. I followed names on patches like crumbs. I left lists hoping to one day follow them back. Back through the underworld and across the mainstream, up from the sea and over the hills. To the place where the trail started and stops. And begins anew.



The West Village, Manhattan, February 2004

In a new city, for real this time, I am doing a well-paying, pleasant bike delivery job, which I hate. I hate it because cars, cabs and customers treat me as disposable. I'm doing a job that is almost exclusively the domain of recent immigrants and the scorn I feel is meant for them.

It sucks. And I'll quit and return to my middle class security, as anyone would, but others will still be absorbing this energy. And I'm afraid I won't try to fight it. I'll just ignore the ugly things I've seen and look after my own hide, as other people do. Because I can't take on the incredible class differential and the way this city tries to eat its poor and recent arrivals alive.

At the way sewer gratings reach up through new snow, gripping bike tires and knocking riders frighteningly close to drivers who think 4-wheel drive means there's no need to slow down in inclement weather. (Though based on the SUVs I've seen hydroplaning down Hudson, I'd rather have a bicycle.) At the way the city's rich truly believe their two dollar tips legitimate asking another person to risk his life. Because, after all, *it's more than they would make in their country.*

I bring food to rich yuppies who suddenly realize they have no money or can't find their wallet and I treat them like the confused children they are, helping them charge their food or, on one occasion, walking a man to the ATM. This happens in the stairwells of buildings, the creepy public-private spaces where the residents of wealthy neighborhoods leave alarmed notes. Such as:

DO NOT LET ANYONE YOU DON'T KNOW THROUGH THE DOOR. YOUR FELLOW RESIDENTS UNDERSTAND THE NEED FOR SECURITY.

While in foyers and entranceways in other parts of town, recent immigrants and poor people are shot at by cops who see guns instead of wallets, cell phones and Twix bars.

It really is that bad. It's bad enough to look away from, and to walk away from if you can. Whatever is going on with the world right now—with the differential between the rich and poor, the guns and drugs and the machine of war—you don't want to look it in the face and call it out.

In 1989, I saw one praying mantis eat another in my best friend's back yard. In 2004, I try to forget what my stomach felt like at that moment and I can't.

I sometimes feel the way I did as a child. Like I've never seen the world change and therefore don't believe it can. And yet the world changes for the better all the time. Sometimes it's me who won't change. Sometimes I'm the static one, the toxic quantity binding the fresh soil to the ancient bones below.

I'm seriously concerned about my ability to not go ballistic when faced with disrespect or condescension. It's always there, anger filling up a person the size of me who insists on standing exactly where I am. Or anger that's bigger than me and the excess has to go somewhere. I try not to let it out when other people are nearby. I try to keep it from hurting anyone, especially myself. But it gets harder and harder.

One bad tip during nasty weather found me throwing newspapers around a lobby, cursing at top volume. Another time I was walking, returning from another not-worth-it delivery, when I realized I could kick a metal grate as hard as I wanted and get away with it, getting a rise out of the two well-coifed women walking by. They shrieked, such a silly and satisfying sound. But really, someone had to do it.

My anger towards women, in particular, astounds me. At their tailored and impossibly boring clothes. At their $2500 apartments and $2 tips. Their cab hailing and absolute ignorance as they snipe at me for riding on the sidewalk instead of bloody Seventh Ave. I blame them and I mourn for them, because they look the most like me.

In their mirrored foyers I look at my dirty face, scraggly dyke haircut and hand-me-down clothes, torn but not on purpose. And I think I look like a million bucks. Like someone with something to say, and I don't just mean directions to the white hipsters who single me out for asking on the J train. Like something to say, right or wrong, to anyone. Like someone, thank god, PRAISE JESUS!, who doesn't have to react with moneyed feminine confusion or disgust when faced with the facts of commerce, reproduction or killing.

How did you end up an erotically packaged child? I want to ask them. *When you had every opportunity to grow up to be a real person?*

And they pity me in turn.

It has always been the responsibility of women to be ignorant of one another.

The other day I saw a black woman from the neighborhood where I live and the Muslim cashier of the 99 cent store bonding, in near tears, while talking over the high counter about how hard life is.

"You gotta have some tricks," the black woman was saying. "To even get by in this world."

The Muslim woman hadn't been here long. I don't know how she handled what she had to deal with every day: near fights, howling kids, consistently rude customers. And she was nodding, with dry tears or swallowed tears, and I got my white ass—that people have to see on their off days, their break from the reality of racism—out of the way.

As I walked out the black woman said, "See when you're from here, it's hard. They don't give you shit."

They don't. Black people don't get shit in this country, can't even work for it, immigrants are told their lives are expendable and I drank gin for ten hours today! It keeps going. The world keeps rocking back and forth in its little hole in the universe.

I came home to start drinking and found Tennessee lying on the floor, rubbing his belly.

"Are you ok?"

"I drank a fifth of whiskey and ate a pound of tuna last night before I went to bed."

"And then you woke up and shit out a small child?"

"Basically."

I plan to write but I don't write. I grumble and mumble, feel premenstrual, announce every cramp while pointing finger guns at my head. I sit in front of the laptop with a New Document open on Microsoft Word.

"How's the blank page coming?" Tennessee asks.

"FUKKK OFF!!" I try to give him two middle fingers but a middle finger and a pinkie come up. China has been painting for hours and doesn't even look up. She paints and paints, reacting to my exclamations of despair but missing the physical comedy of increasingly aggressive hand signals taking place around her. China's art is what Lissa calls, "precision whiskey bottle painting." She downs a pint then spends inordinate amounts of time drawing excruciatingly detailed characters on the outside of the glass. There is a shriveled lady with an iron lung, pillbox hat and still burning cigarette that China keeps painting. One day when we go to Greenpoint, an ancient looking furrier invites us in and makes her try on hats he's made, each of them composed of three small animals apiece. In the fox hat—which has an actual fox's face shriveled on its crest—she looks so familiar I'm momentarily stunned.

"You look like the lady on the bottle!" I say.

Exactly.

What people will look like old. What they'll look like dead.

I suddenly understand that she's been pain
and wizened, with the same careful goth-dyke haircu
the whiskey she guzzles constantly. How much faith i
own future in the life you live now? And to smile, turn
to the light and asking, *isn't she beautiful?*

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The Hills 1999-2001

On the street where I grew up, past the ice cream shop and the stationary store, an old movie house teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. One screen, huge. Cathedral ceilings. A movie theatre with balcony seating—can you imagine? It closed when I was a child. I fantasized about breaking in as a teenager, but the girl who grew up in the hills with me, Sera, actually did it.

She told me this at sea level, a thousand miles away. And because I could not crack its mysteries as a child, I could not reconstruct a point of entry as an adult. Still, this had taken place on *my* street. This girl had been inside my monster, had penetrated its fragile, eager heart. (These are my bones, this is my vagina.) Sometimes I dream she is calling me to the roof of the old movie theatre and I can't go. Not because it is a thousand miles away, but because even if I was in front of it, I could not get inside. I feel as though I was in front of the suburb I grew up in for nearly two decades, and I could not get inside.

I always try to change the dream, imagine placing my foot on the dusty padlock then slithering like a lizard up the smashed and empty marquee. I'd then find her up there, alternately watching the street and the sky, as though something might happen in either realm.

"Did you go to Rockin Rex on Central Avenue?" She asked me once.

"Yes," I answered mechanically, "I went to Rockin Rex. From age 15 to 19, I went to Rockin Rex. I wish we could have met." I wish I couldn't count all my interactions with punk kids I didn't know during these years on both hands. What was I waiting for?

This girl was always roofs to me. I have no associations with them that don't involve her. She wrote often about people on roofs, looking down while holding the slope with pointed toes, tensed ankles and thighs. There may have been more to her obsession than the suicidal *urge, but* I'll never know. So when I imagine her up on the movie *theatre*, I picture Sera's relationship with that roof as a kind of love affair, after the flame has gone out. A high place which, the promise of suicide at last granted, she might enjoy for every simple quality she never could with something so white hot burning on the electric line between edifice and sky.

In the town without sidewalks, I thought about suicide everyday. The urge is common, as pain is common. Regular, as cruelty is regular. It was a friend, this urge, and it's gone now. Sera took the particular suicide of the suburbs, and left with it. It is possible to live many different lives, participate in many subcultures, jump from persona to persona, but the death you die is your own. In death, your life becomes one book.

Sera's suicide collapses her life, each year stacked evenly upon the next, no era more important than any other. Her suicide *is* her childhood and teenage years, her traveler years, her internships, her cold mornings at Black Mesa or in some freight yard. And because the girl I know from the hills is dead, my book is closed now too. Suddenly and definitively, I've become an adult.

Life goes on, Tennessee and I say, meaning that we'll some day forget Sera's face, forget our ideals, forget sleeping on the side of the road and trying to change America. Life goes on. When you chose it, it goes on and out. I sometimes feel I have lost more than I will ever have again. That being an adult means becoming the dark shadow between the soil and the clear bright sun. But I get bigger everyday. On good days being an adult to me means deciding: I am going to stand here now, and I'm going to make a difference.

Brooklyn, New York, May 2004

I got a knife pulled on me by a thirteen year old kid. I didn't have to be there. He called me a *bitch* while I was riding my bike home from work, so I called him a *little shit*. I got the feeling he might chase me so I jumped off my bike and put it to one side, exactly the way you aren't supposed to when facing off with an attacker or a stray dog. I did it on purpose. I have a temper and I hate to run. Whatever is coming for me in this life, I've always wanted to see its face.

“I’m just riding my bike. You don’t need to say that s me…” I yelled, trailing off with fascination at what his fingers doing.

He was walking towards me. I was expecting curses, a hard jaw, but his face had more give. He was unfolding something, or tr to. Was it a knife or a straight razor? The blade was so thin an sharp. I was weighed down with a coat, helmet and backpack, but bare I would never have been able to move faster than this kid. Nor have the desire to hurt him. I’m a fighter but I had no fight. I let it out of me like sand until I was standing in a pile of it, totally drained.

“Don’t. Please just don’t.”

He said something I’ll never remember. He had been prepa to cut me but everything was different now. There were the beginni of tears but I didn’t let them spill over. I didn’t want to be melodrama Also, I respected him. How many times had I wanted to stop and sc someone who disrespected me with a weapon? And here he was actua doing it. I’m a fighter and I respected him as an adversary, which something old and real.

“I’m sorry,” I said, meaning equally *I’m sorry you have a kn and that makes you right* and *I’m sorry I humiliated you on your street front of your friends.*

A woman was standing twenty feet away, gaping for the fi moment of our face-off. Then she recovered her voice.

“_______! What are you doing? Are you crazy? What are yo doing?!”

I heard the power in her voice, mixed with the fear. She had toddler by the hand. I felt her foot almost stepping forward, the recementing itself to the pavement, the energy coming through her throa instead. I was grateful to her for being a witness, though it took m hours to understand that. Because she didn’t do anything that anyon wouldn’t do. But you can’t expect people to be anything you need them to be, especially—for some reason—witnesses.

“Please don’t do it.”

He had my life in his hands but as soon as he gave it back he’d be a *little shit* again, handed over to his mother by this neighbor. Or so I hoped. His eyes glazed over, twin storm clouds of power and horror colliding behind his eyes. I looked at him, hard, as though to tell him I was still there with him. That he wasn’t a little shit. That despite the knife and not because of it he was a powerful person. It was a moment of total intimacy, perhaps the closest I’ve ever felt to another human being.

"Get out of here," he said. I nodded. He folded the knife and turned away. Over his shoulder I mouthed the words HOLY SHIT to the woman with the toddler, though my brain was too far gone to register her reaction. I wanted to stay and talk to his parents, but he could still turn back and cut me. Plus I'd made an agreement. I almost wanted to start all over and pick another fight, which is how I knew I couldn't trust myself. I got on my bike and rode away.

For the first hour after I felt like a failure for not staying. For the next I felt like a failure for losing my temper in the first place. For the third I felt pretty good, because at least this happened to me because of something I had done. Feeling stupid is definitely better than feeling powerless. But what if this bad thing had happened with no provocation on my part? Would I then stop biking, hole myself away, stop believing that people are basically good but hurt one another with regularity just the same?

I had been one of the few people I know who'd never been held up with a weapon or violently assaulted. A fact I mentioned frequently. Oh well. Another strut of my fragile sense of safety popped clean off the rim. They go one by one and eventually you have to hop off, I imagine, and hit the ground running. Unless you've always been running.

On the way home, still shaking from the knife, I found a dollar bill blowing in the road with a pile of lotto tickets. I bent down and swooped it up. I expected some car or person on their stoop to challenge me and I was ready to give it right back. The challenge, not the money. Even after being drained, I still had so much anger. I wanted someone to beat up, which is the cycle that probably brought this boy to me. What happened to him earlier that day, or that week? Whatever it was, I know I've been willing to hurt someone for less. I know that the rage of the world—the Iraqi prison abuse, the beheadings—bubbles up outside the war zone. That rage born of economic violence and racism comes back as guns and knives and torture and decapitation. We're all so close to cutting each other right now, and so close to weeping.

I tell China I'm compiling this zine, that it's too damn long and is depressing.

"That's like my box," she says. "There's this one box I have stored. It's got some movies I made, some music I made, some music friends made that I can't get rid of. Pictures I took. Dirty pictures and everything. It's small but…ummm…kinda heavy."

"No shit it's heavy. I've got a box too."

"It's getting heavier"

"That happens," I tell her, for once the older, wiser one.

"I know I won't open it for like 10 years and when I do I'll freak out. It's like a nightmare waiting to happen."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

"So," she says, eyes and jaw shifting, "when are you gonna open your box?"

The Hills, 2001-2004

In the town without sidewalks, I walked in the street. My parents were both good people and good parents. They sacrificed a lot for me and my sister, for our food, "good schools," health insurance and security. But these sacrifices have since become the very fabric of my discontent.

I am grateful for their sacrifices and angry at the society that demanded them. At the cultural vacuums that suck people into places where nothing, nothing can grow. The SUV and no sidewalk culture of endless chain retail outfits, parking lots big as parks used to be. At a lifestyle that's hard on the blood, all acidic colas and coffee, processed cheese and the feeling of always hurrying and never getting there. Of being a teenager listening to music in cars in order to create a bubble, to experience motion. There was always this unarticulated need to try to create some kind of heat. Maybe even to burn some of it down.

It's hard to make a mess in middle class suburbs. These places are like self cleaning ovens, the kind people don't cook in for fear of dirtying them. Us punks, we try to make a mess. We try to make a warning. But the suburbs are a self replicating regime. They make you, they made you and all you can do is make them again. Everything you do becomes them, goes back into the systems you intended to dismantle. Zines on bleached paper, borne of computers, exchanged for dollars that then sink themselves into corporate copy shops and fast food on the strip. Your skate shoes have gasoline on the soles and there's a new punk cd in the changer because it isn't, it isn't, what everyone else is selling.

I'm trying to tell you: you can't do it here. You can't say it here.

As with gender, they have taken the language of our discontent and turned it into brand recognition and target marketing. There is no more language. There is only discontent. There is only leaving and arriving (leaving is different than arriving). There is only everything that isn't you.

But the suburbs are food and fuel for those of us who grew up there. They are everything I know how to do well. They are the surge in my blood, nerves first whet on drives in cars as a teenager. They are where and how I became me; where and how my wanting began. They are still the yardstick to be held against all my triumphs and failures. The wall, upon my death, my life will be collapsed against.

I can't go back. I have to go back.

Sound familiar? Common, as pain is common. Regular, as cruelty is regular. Common, as the fate of the world is common, so common it has been foretold.

We are the children of the 70's. Born of white flight, a bad idea made by the progenitor of all bad ideas: good intentions. We don't go back and because of this, we rarely go forward. We are appalled at the racist, sexist corporate power structure. But we are its children and we speak as children—petulant, dependant, cruel. We know everything. Meaning, we know exactly what we can and can't get away with. (This is the entire story, everything, all of it.)

They have eaten our language and we have only our discontent. We have only our best friend's parent's car charging up the hill at 2 am, punk band on the CD player, volume 40. The church is enormous and luminous at the crest, where the night sky also begins again. It is coming at us, fast and silver, this monster older than the cave in which it sleeps. We have only, *fuck religion fuck religion fuck religion*. Only yelling, only singing, the everything we know into the world that refuses it and by extension us. We have only our truth: that we wanted to do something right and good, something whole and beautiful. We just didn't know how.

A MUSIC REVIEW, PART 2:

"I can't really talk about this," Tennessee says. He looks very lonely, in the bar with the gold toilets and Judas Priest circa 1994 on the TV. I had just made an offhand comment to the effect of, *don't ever stop being a woman, dude, cause I like you that way, ok?* And when I look back he—who was then still going by *she*—is crying. Whoops. I'd never seen him cry before. I sit there watching Judas Priest, making a major mental note not to ever say anything like that to anyone ever, ever again. I then try to bring up pronouns and he swats them away, one after another like gnats around his face. Now we have nothing left to say to each other and everything that needs saying.

"I'm sorry," I begin.

"No, I need to be able to talk about this. But I can't yet."

The next time I see Tennessee six months have passed and I'm moving into his house. I drop my bag and flop down on the dilapidated couch that will later be split in two when a bunch of mixed gender and sexuality queers pile too boisterously onto it in order to drool over Johnny Depp during a showing of John Water's "Crybaby." That night China will wake me up at 4 am to show me triumphantly how she has stacked phone books to make the couch, which was also her bed, into a boat-like sleeping troth. But tonight the couch is still intact and Tennessee uses some immensely silly segue to tell me he is transitioning. I congratulate him and we make our first pot of what will become a long happy winter of farty bean dinners.

We never do "talk" about "it" because there isn't actually anything to say. I love my friend so much, in the way you can only express—as I've learned from China—through earnest and escalating threats of violence. Like, *dude, I love you so much, I'd kill anyone for you. So if anyone ever fucks with you let me know and I'll kill them, ok?*

We share a ribald conversational style that induces laughter 98% of the time and tears the other 2%. Whereupon we say, *whoops*, and try again. Being raunchy is a necessity when the vast majority of the things we say get said repeatedly. A favorite topic, for example, is New York/the direction of our lives.

Tennessee will say something like, "As for my time in New York, I feel like I've done a lot of—"

"People," I'll say, moving to avoid a direct smack in retaliation.

"Things since I've been here. Like create—"

"Drama." At this point, I'll dive around the couch as a pillow comes flying.

"Enough, interrupting Jew!"

It so good to laugh, to share hope and rage with someone who's been with me since the beginning. As usual Sera was the link, the reason I met Tennessee, though it was bound to happen sooner or later.

He claims he found my first zine in the bathroom of a punk house. I claim I sent a trade for his and when his arrived, it came without a letter. No matter. Soon there were letters, but we were still kids then.

When I think of Tennessee as a teenager, with long shiny hair and a big pink t-shirt, I have to admit that he didn't really look like anyone. (When we arrive we aren't anyone in particular. In time we become specific people.) I remember his seriousness and how impressed with his artiness I was, with his camera and his poetic/melodramatic letters about literature written in tiny, all capital letter serial killer handwriting. Tennessee at 18, I remember as a blur visually, maybe—I'm thinking of the side of his face and always those converse sneakers—a rough outline of the best friend I know today. But I guess most of us are. We're all on such strange journeys.

When I was 18, I had not begun to menstruate. Every year the doctor would threaten to do genetic tests on me, then offer to wait another 6 months. I watched all my friends start to bleed. I waited as my sister—3 years younger—started, while in the high school locker room the popular girls would ask me (somehow they always know):

"Pads or tampons?"

Having long since learned that every question kids ask is a faint that sets up an opening shot, I never gave them anything. "Pads. I just find tampons uncomfortable, ya know?"

The genetic tests were to determine whether I had XX chromosomes in each blood cell, or XXY. Whether I was 'a real woman' or 'genetically a man.' On the eve of the tests I rolled my eyes back inside my head and stared down the cells. I examined myself and realized I was not a woman. I prepared to find out what I knew the tests would say.

Then the doctor's appointment was pushed back and life went on as usual. I was at the Baskin Robbins where I'd worked all through high school when my stomach started feeling really weird and I found brown stuff in my underwear.

"Great, I'm shitting myself."

It took me two days to realize I was menstruating. That's how convinced I was of my gender, or lack of a gender.

The next two years were busty. I stopped wearing a bra because the AA sized training bras began to hurt. My best friend Al tried to convince me I'd grown, but I couldn't see it. She finally dragged me to Lord and Taylor's department store and I was surprised to find how comfortable bra technology had become when C cups were employed. It was like sleight of hand, a circus act. I didn't see my naked breasts but had to acknowledge the new cups didn't hang or crumple.

Hips came too, which I would not have understood except for the pull of my jeans. This was everything I'd hungered for so desperately all through middle and high school, but I no longer cared. It didn't reflect my blood, the tests that never happened. I must be XX because I bleed.

But on some can't-touch-the-spot-that-hurts level, I still know my blood's letters are inscrutable. And the strangest thing was that as the years passed, I forgot the process by which I became a girl.

Gender is a fugue.

Two years ago, I was reading Kate Bornstein's *My Gender Workbook* in an over-packed San Francisco queer crash-house. Eight residents were stuffed into its four rooms, plus one roommate's mom and all us houseguests.

Have you ever felt like you're not a real woman? Not a real man?

No. I'm a real woman. Always have been. Nothing more, less or else. I wondered why she kept asking me. I mean, trans and gender issues are really important to me, but that's cause I love my friends and this world. What's so strange about that?

It took me about a hundred and fifty pages to remember that I didn't know my own gender as a teenager and then had to be convinced of it, slowly, over time. So nothing actually turned out to be amiss. Except my forgetting, the cliff between who we were and who we are. The way that you arrive, become a specific person, and lose all the unspecific people you loved without knowing it. People you used to be, people you still owe your life to.

Sometimes I'm not a girl or a boy or anything like either one. I'm reminded of something Altercation experienced after drinking a non-medically sanctioned quantity of Robittussin.

"Ammi, I'd become thousands of pieces of varnished wood!"

It was how she said it, the pure operatic joy in her voice. The absolution of not being human for even a little while. I think drag is a more honest approach to music then this constant replaying of canned songs that everyone seems so into. IPod my ass. Music makes me want to play, not sit on the subway or the cafeteria line, trying to forget I'm alive.

There is constant traffic between desires.

Greene Street: May 2004

I wake up in Brooklyn, read a zine off my roommate's floor and listen to the church's low, off key singing. I watch people out the window nearly hit pedestrians crossing the dangerous corner, both groups making obscene hand gestures at the other. I watch a man mime like he's stroking a woman's crotch through her thin shorts and I feel bruised inside. The world is so angry and ugly sometimes that I just don't know how to be a part of it. Which is the same way I feel when it *isn't* being angry and ugly, but with a greater sense of danger and a thicker fear of the wound. It is two days after the incident with the boy and the knife and I feel awful. I'm terrified of:

Biking all night at work.
Biking to work and home from work.
Riding in cars, especially on highways.
The despair I feel on the subway.
Basically, all forms of motion.

The Iraqi prison scandal is a week old; the first American was beheaded there three days ago.

On one hand, I feel bad, as though I may have played some part in a chain of events that ends up ruining this kid's life. I mean, I didn't call the cops, didn't send them to a block looking for a 12 year old kid: that's horror. But what if pulling a knife on a grown woman without consequence gets this boy a reputation he can't put back? People are responsible for their actions. But at 12 or 13 I wasn't, and couldn't have been, responsible for anything this heavy. That isn't enough time to both see how the world operates and to figure out how you need to operate in order to survive it.

But then I think of how un-godly sharp the knife was. I was wearing a heavy rain jacket. If he struck I would have folded my arms and turned, screaming for effect while hoping the coat would eat the blade in a burbling yellow plastic tide of material. I am always thinking like this. About how a slight cut might create enough blood and chaos to smother the violence in a thick cloak of consequence and remorse. I'm always thinking about how a situation might move from fight or flight to the endless thereafter.

It often doesn't occur to me that I shouldn't have to.

That nobody should have to play with violence like clay, should have to try to shape with their vision or direct it away from their bodies. As though *please, I want to live* is a dirty thought, an idea best shared with a lover only. As though *fuck my past I'm just not done* is some sort of secret that, once uttered, must be paid for with the appropriate payment of terror and disease. Those are Sera quotes and the reason I no longer believe in magic. She said them and then she died. There is, quite simply, no alchemy of brutality. You cannot beat something until it becomes beautiful.

Two nightmares came last night like twin hammers. After that, I slept with the lights on. I'm sometimes afraid this world has lost the basic, natural instinct to heal itself. Lying in bed at night I suddenly realize it might have been this kid's original intention to slash my face, and that makes me angry. That makes me want to kill the *little shit*. Braided with the fear is always anger, like Siamese twins joined deep in the stem of my brain. Try to separate them and mercifully, both die.

* * *

Tennessee asks Daphne—who is a poet and feminist and a queer—why he should even bother to write. Who is going to read it?

She says, “You have to remember, we are fighting a war here.”

The rose is also a loaded gun. It can go off in your hands, or on the paper.

New York City, May 2004

Flowers come to the West Village in May. Tulips and poppies and crisp, delicate orchids. With them come laminated signs—ordering me not to lock my bike to the wrought iron fencing—which pop up as though they’re the second flowering of these carefully pruned plants.

I find this note, posted mid-May beside some juicy yellow carnations:

“SOME DEFINTIONS FOR LATE NIGHT TRESPASSERS:

A bench—where you sit.

A flowerbox—what you look at.

DO NOT SIT ON FLOWER BOXES. COPS WILL BE CALLED.”

Pretty flowers wielding increasingly aggressive statements: this is what “quality of life” means in the wealthy enclaves of the big city. In the places where labor by undocumented immigrants brings salmon to people paying $3000 rents. The residents wonder why the world has to be so hard and mean as to trample even the flowers meant to soften it. And the delivery drivers wonder where we’re supposed to lock up, because every available surface seems sheathed in NO BIKES signs. I am certain that to demand labor of people but consistently ignore their contribution constitutes some kind of emotional and economic abuse.

I mean, what is this hypothetical caller going to tell the cops anyway: “Officer, this man killed a flower”? Does anyone really want to live in a world where this is a crime instead of a basic tragedy?

I get China a job at the new restaurant my bosses opened and we work the same shifts in alternate universes. The old restaurant is called

Westville, named for its location in the West Village. (Yuppies love that.) The new one, in the East Village, is called Westville East.

"Not Eastville?"

"No." Jay, my boss, barks.

I grew up in a town called Eastchester in the county of Westchester, so this seems perfectly logical to me, but I can understand other people's confusion. I go to Westville East to pick up China after getting off at Westville and it's super-trippy. Like the same restaurant, but in another dimension. With the same décor and some of the same people but, all weird and shit.

"Ha ha!" Jay offers me the dregs of his beer when I share my déjà vu, and China does the same. He doesn't have a liquor license and it's what they've got. Jay first won my respect by obsessively playing Johnny Cash for 12 hour stretches.

"Look, if you come to my house you're going to hear Johnny," he explained. "If you come to my restaurant, you're going to hear Johnny."

"Works for me." Though ironically, as I worry that the yuppie clientele is fetishizing the music as post-ironic post-rural atmosphere to go with their post-ironic, post-urban, organic, free-range hot dogs.

"An A in a circle to mark tickets for Ammi, because she's an anarchist," Jay said during my first shift. I had long hair then and was making an effort to dress conservatively.

"How did you know?!"

"There are things you can just tell about a person." He proceeded over the next few weeks to apologize for capitalism every time I stepped out for some air.

"You know me, just trying to support my unborn babies, ha ha ha. And the girlfriend I keep in the freezer—you met her when you had to get the kitchen more fries, remember?"

I ignore this. "But you gave me a job. Why would I be mad that you believe in capitalism?"

"There are things you can tell about a person."

Jay is one of a breed of people I've met who's buoyant love for humanity has been so irreparably crushed into cynicism that all they can do is open a restaurant. As though feeding people is the last stop before getting a semi-automatic rifle and offing them.

We got into some snits during the winter, as Jay would send me to ridiculous locations in the snow, out of greed and the twisted idea that bike delivery should be some sort of extreme sport. Which he felt entitled to because he rode a scooter. Huh? Five years of bike work and my mind is nearly gone. I am filled with fear and loathing towards any kind of precipitation, going so far as to wear full plastic rain suits and cursing like a vampire under holy water when the drops touch one of my few swathes of exposed skin.

"How was tonight?" Jay asks us both. I'm folding my rain suit and China is shivering in her soaked sweatshirt and garbage bag poncho, moving to put away the house bike.

"Fine," I growl. China just rolls her eyes. She is a masochist and Jay is a sadist, a combination that's resulted in him scheduling her for every single shift since the restaurant's opening. He promises to hire another three bicyclists at some point, and she's curious to see if she'll make it that long. I'm sick of delivery and want to quit, but where besides the restaurant business can I find people this whacked out on adrenaline and this close to the edge of their own strange cliffs? As we ride off into the rainy night China pumps her feet hard, flying ahead of me, the black bag billowing out and making her look like Batgirl.

We find pool and beer, then hit the bridge, conspiring all the while about who else we can get to do this work. We're a dyke bike mafia of two, which is double what I had before. It's such a relief to pass this burden to China, though I feel a little guilty, like I've bitten her and made her a vampire too. Destined to ride all night, battling cars and knowing things we'd rather not. One time, for example, I almost ran over a rat.

China and I play pool late into the night, at a second bar on the Brooklyn side of the bridge. I watch her turn straight women gay, watch them hiking up their skirts and declaring submission at her superior game.

"Whatever," she says, unlit cigarette fused to her lower lip. When she leans over for her next shot, I notice the knife sticking out of her underwear. China's knife, which oddly seems identical to the one the boy pulled on me.

Riding home, China picks a fight with every car we pass. We're both still amped, if a bit drowsy from the beer. My chain pops off on Flushing Ave and she puts it back for me, both of us laughing and playing Batgirl. We get back on our bikes, crest the hill and ride hard for no reason. The faster I go the better I feel. I watch the potholes coming quick and the handle of China's knife, glinting at the small of her back when the bag blows up. The rain is gone. I feel like the world is more and more wrong, but that, for the first time in days, I might be alright.

There is constant traffic between desires. White head lights, red tail lights. Sometimes I can't sleep at night.

A NEWSPAPER REVIEW:

It's another one of those sweet days China says we'll look back on as 'hot.'

"You're sitting there in your little white tank top. I'm in a bikini. We got everything."

She goes to the corner for an ice cream and gets hit on by the old ladies in front of the shelter. The sky is so swollen with rain it looks like night, but the thunder has yet to start. I pull blues legend Robert Johnson off my housemate Chris's shelf and put him on the turntable, then paraphrase the story on the record sleeve.

"Yeah he sold his soul to the devil in order to be able to play whatever he wanted on the guitar. That's not on the sleeve but I've heard that's the legend. He was recorded only twice and died before his …uhh…twenty first birthday, poisoned by a jealous girlfriend."

"Whoa," says China, who is twenty-one. All day, everyday, we say: *I could die tonight, I want to die, I don't want to die so bad!*

On one side of the world are the wealthy blues collectors, who can go here anytime. On the other are musicians doing what they do in well-celebrated poverty. Americans rejoice over the saleable record, novel or print of a painting far more than the journey the artist took to make the original. We celebrate the cash of the collector far more than the creative spirit in history and daily life. On one side of the world are the tourists with video cameras, filming pre-arranged displays of department store Santas. On the other are the punks, the immigrants and stowaways, riding trains through places where no one has ever printed a postcard. And if a postcard was printed it would be captioned, implicitly, with the idea that this wasn't meant for us. They don't print postcards for us.

I am not sure what makes something beautiful and important, as opposed to lonely and sad—crumbling masonry and chipped stained glass versus cockroach limbs on white painted drywall—but it has something to do with the age of the decay. We all want things that were made a long time ago, and with a great deal of effort. Like a high calorie sandwich, something well made feels filled with heat, sustaining. Everything made now seems plastic. So we battle other youngsters, as well as movies studios and collectors, for thrift store scores. For the good fat that reminds us we're real people, capable of doing real work. We drive up the price of the past with our disenchantment at the present. It isn't a healthy way to live, but this isn't a healthy world.

"I hate these onions," China says.

"What onions?" We're sitting in the living room, drinking red wine, waiting for the rain.

"These Onions," she says, holding up the satirical newspaper we get free in New York. I'm a long time fan of the Onion, but living in New York has put a dent in my enjoyment of it. Because there is an Onion-demographic, people who respond to irony in advertising. Who even put personal ads in the damn thing.

"Look at these assholes," I say, holding up a page featuring three just-ironic enough heterosexual females positioned opposite three just-ironic enough heterosexual males. "These fucking people want to breed, god help us."

"God would probably be into it."

"Yeah, they can fuck then go to this ironic clothing store and look, on page 3, they can eat an ironic pizza afterwards. Fuckin' Onions."

I worked so hard this winter to save my money for imaginary expenses and imaginary trips abroad. But the truth is, I'm afraid to spend money on anything besides travel, art, food and booze. Because the only thing that makes me different from most of the Onion's readers is that I'm not a market. The only thing that separates me is that I'm poor and if I'm going to acquire identity-signifying ironic crap, it'll be off the sidewalk.

My grandfather said, "This country. Used to be if you worke very hard, for many years, you could have an easy life. That's not tru anymore."

He was talking about his family. Russian-Jewish immigrant Lower East Side, poor: "but we don't talk about that."

I laughed at him. "If you have to work very hard for many year how is it an easy life?"

But it was.

Now you can work very hard, for many years, and have a ha life.

This is an important distinction.

Westville, The West Village, June 2004

The promise of New York is different kinds of people, all working their asses off and saying weird shit.

On the delivery team, we have the Mexican mafia, the Israeli mafia and the dyke mafia. The Israeli guys are amiable and can speak Spanish without training, because they claim it's exactly like English. The Mexican guys are really different from each other. The dykes are all grouchy.

The person I work with most often is Williams and due to the fact that he is basically a dickhead, we at first don't get along. Then we discover that if we speak Spanish all night, or try to teach each other Spanish and English, we stop competing and enjoy each other's company. This leads to many trips behind the counter to ask the barista the difference between *creer* and *pensar*, a habit that variously annoys and charms the rest of the staff. And leads to thrilling conversations like (in Spanish):

Where is your wife?

My wife is in Mexico, but something something something.

What?

Something something something.

Your wife is in Mexico but you can date other women?

No. I can't be with my wife all the time. But maybe I could date other women. The rain is romantic, yes? I like to lie in bed and listen to the rain.

That's great.

I speak Spanish with Benjamin too, who is too nice to actually learn any Spanish from. Since we both work two jobs the day we deliver together our conversation each week is confined to confirming this, confirming that we are both tired and staring off into space for the rest of the night. Luckily, I learn quickly from Williams who refuses to speak English, insists on talking to me when I'm exhausted and then interrupts to correct my tenses.

Many nights I want to ask him, *why are you such an asshole all the time?* but am prevented by not knowing how to say "asshole" in Spanish. In addition to discussing the job, life and the weather, I have learned how to talk shit about Chemi when he leaves for a delivery and thus am able to catch a cook talking shit about me one night. Ah the promise of New York. Shit talk and a contest where I am called on to identify the "punkest cook" resulting in hurt feelings from two out of three contestants.

One night there's too many drivers scheduled and there's no way I'm going to back off.

"Hold on," Chemi says. He whispers something to Yaniv, the barista, then returns. "Look: Israeli connection. Yaniv can go home, I'll do counter and you guys can drive. Everyone is happy then."

"Cool," we all say.

"Chemi, you're a peacemaker," I say, then realize my gaff. He catches it too.

"Yeah, too bad I can't do the same for my country, eh?"

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, it's the truth."

I feel like I watched Chemi de-macho-ify before my very eyes. He came to the restaurant straight from the Israeli army and rode the bike hard for about two days before realizing he didn't have to.

One day a basket, otherwise known as a milk crate, needs to be tied on to a bike. I'm annoyed because I have had to complete this task twice already and ask Chemi to do it. He does, than stands back proudly.

"Well I guess I didn't waste three years in the army. Just two years…uhh…fifty one weeks…uhh…six days and twenty-three hours. Because with the other hour I guess I learned to tie a good knot." He smiles cynically.

"They *are* good knots," I say. I am trying to be supportive because the last time he had a bike problem, I fixed it. Which, actually, since his de-macho-fication, didn't bother him at all.

"Thank you for helping me," was his reply. "I asked William because you were on a delivery, but he just told me to fuck off. Why is that guy always such an asshole?"

"You understood 'fuck off' in Spanish?"

"It was the hand motions," he says.

We both may be bitter and grouchy but at work, I am officially the bad kid. Williams is the good sibling, only because the rest of the English speaking family is oblivious to how foul tempered he is.

"Fucking thunderstorm. What the fuck. You should cancel deliveries. Fuckers."

I proceed to sheath myself entirely in plastic while fondly remembering my first day delivering in a tropical storm, when I didn't have raingear and didn't feel I needed it. I remember pouring water out of my shoes and loving it. Ah how things change over time. Go bad over time. Williams starts bitching too, albeit under his breath.

"Why can't you be more like Williams, Ammi? Williams isn't yelling."

Williams hears his name and looks up. I paraphrase Jay's thought and Williams paraphrases, *why is that asshole making us ride in this shit?*

It's my night to stay late and Williams stands in the doorway as new delivery orders come in one after the other, waiting for the monsoon to slow so he can make a dash for the subway.

"I hate you," I tell Jay.

"Look, why don't you just ask Williams to stay and help. Williams always wants to work."

"No he doesn't. He's going to kill me if I ask him."

"No he won't. Williams never wants to kill anyone."

"Ok, that's enough." I jog across the restaurant to Williams. "*Quieres quedar?*"

He gives me look of death as Jay attends to some pie. I roll my eyes.

"You weren't even here in the winter," I say.

"Que?"

"*El invierno. Fue terrible. La...*" I forget the word for snow and make little flurry motions.

William wrinkles up his nose.

"*Trabajas aqui en el invierno? Porque*?"

"Because I'm stupid."

With that Williams pats my head, laughs evilly, and slips out into the storm.

There were other reasons too. Maybe I wanted to prove how tough I was. Maybe I'm obsessed with not falling into debt. I made good money, but I also wrecked out on ice and rode ten hour shifts in rain, sleet, hail, snow and freezing rain. I would wake up the mornings of my doubles and look out the window. Often snow was either coming down or already piled up, closing off the side of the lane where bicycles normally pass.

The snow was so beautiful and so terrifying. I would eat two or three packets of instant oatmeal those mornings, breakfasts that tasted like heat and metal, so dry. Then I would pull on the precise number of layers necessary for comfort between the sweat from the stairs and ice from the wind. It was like applying armor, the last layer bulky enough to save for the moment before heading out the door. Sarinya—the third female driver Westville hired—and I bonded about each upturn in the weather, however small.

"Dude it's going to rain today—but its going to be 34 degrees!"

"I know. No gloves. Whoohoo!"

And we were serious. Sarinya was also a full-time messenge and probably the best person who ever has or ever will ride for tha restaurant. Used to racing across the city, she soon got bored with th short runs and quit delivering when the weather got nice.

"So I can ride my bike more," she said.

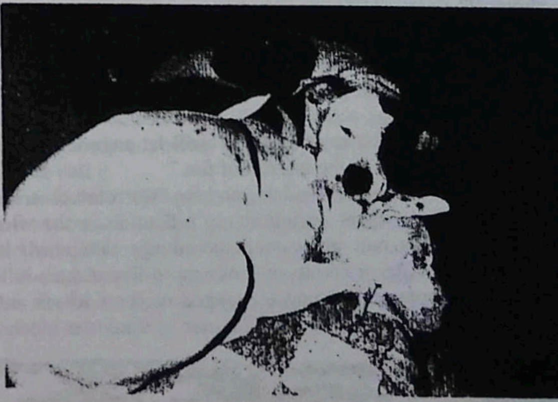
In some ways I like having war stories, but I don't whol believe my own tales. It was hard, but there was also a pleasure to it, total body quiet at the end of the day. I felt battered beyond belief, b also steely beneath the surface. I could go anywhere and touch anythir after work and it—not me—would come away with the bruise.

And yet all I could write about it while the snow was still on t ground was one sentence:

because we're strong, stronger than anyone probably should be

It's June and I can talk about January, but more immedia wounds approach quicker than the words needed to cover the Permanence makes its way by violence or simple repetition into my li I can't go back. I have to go back. I can't be a kid again. But adultho feels like a place I've been exiled to. Somewhere I would never ha gone of my own free will.

My best friend is becoming a man. I'm starting to move plac for things like jobs and a lover, rather than simple fascinations with stre names, with cities I've heard of third hand. I'm closer and closer getting to the point where I'm old enough to be young again. In Ne Orleans I'm a square, but in New York I'm a full blown eccentric. T looks I get from people here make me realize how hard it is to be t thing you say you are. How much responsibility and how much glc there is in smiling your full smile, in letting your teeth show.



pit bull love

So this is what it feels like, I think sometimes. To burst through the plastic wrapping, the mucous membrane, dense ocean, second growth weeds. This is what it feels like to tunnel through packed grey snow, dirty churning water, rain so thick you can't open your eyes against it. This is what its like to make it out of the desert. To feel the wet air of another country, smell broken vegetable stalks and pine cones touched with tarragon. This is what its like to run your fingers through hair that's already been parted, to lick the hole where the tooth once was. This is what its like to touch the first white rain, or have the sky burn blue after the last. To see the slippery sun and to know that – for now – the danger has passed.

* * *

One of those nights of riding, writing in your head riding, when you understand everything and can write it down. Except that you're riding, you're sober, and when you get home you've got to lay the damp clothes out. On the wood floor, like outlines of people sleeping. Your skin is damp too, but from the other side. So you go to sleep naked, wet underwear on the arm of the chair, too tired to think about pens and the thin paper you'd ruin just by touching it with your moist, shaking fingers.

I had all my hair cut off by China during a night of 3 am whiskey shots. The cut, which has what I like to refer to—from my anthropology obsessed days—as a "sagital crest," can also be described colloquially as a "mohawk." But with fins. Housemate Chris says it makes me look like an exotic fish. The phone girls at the restaurant, who are all in beauty school say:

"Ammi, you're so cool. You'll let anyone do anything to your hair, as long as it's in the interest of fun."

So I'm home, it's late, and my wet clothes are asleep on the floor. But I'm awake, staring at my reflection in the window. At my frown, little fins, and ratty camel colored pajama top. My hair is sticking straight up. After a month, it looks more like a duck-billed dinosaur's fan. That bony ridge they may have used to whack into each other repeatedly. I love and hate the haircut. I think the butch woman I like will never see me now. But I also look sleek and very much myse and try to write, worrying about my "queer identity" and tuggin hair to make it grow, which I discovered is possible with my ma during a business trip to New Orleans.

My problem is that I don't have a preordained image of an identity I'm trying to fill with flesh. Al, who I knew as Alison school, identifies as a non-trans, heterosexual (basically) woma the whole time I've known her she's had such a strong image of as a non-woman, as a boy-person with a male name and short hai her up for years and no one—we didn't know any queers, le people challenging gender—would listen. Eight years later she's managed to change her name, legally taking on a traditionall middle name, and get a "boy's" haircut. It's the first I've seen he comfortable in her own shadow. She's way more a woman th ever seen her, and way more of a boy. When I accidentally c Alison at the radical bookstore where she works, people look blankly. For many people, trans and non-trans, there is this id rightness which must be traveled to, but which is indeed a geogr territory. You get there, I imagine, across doubt and difficulty. get closer, like living beside a lake.

Like the Tom Waits song, *when you get far enough away be on your way back home. So I'm at the station, but I can't get train.*

When I look in the mirror, it's always a stranger. Someti ugly I feel sick that I have to carry her around. Sometimes so bea worry about her. I never know what she's supposed to look lik when I put on make up to go out, it's always a clown's face I'm pa Sobriety! Joy! Sometimes the dysphoria is so complete I won could wake up an entirely different woman and never notice. W I'm a woman. I'll be writing it for the rest of my life, but always stutter. When it comes to identity, I sometimes feel like I'm stan the station watching the train move away. A lot of my friends are I'm thinking that it's a good train, that it's going to a good place. while I can't hear the train anymore. My body's still mine, even don't know what to call it.

None of us know if we're leaving or returning.

Away from ourselves and each other or back again, rico through our own skin like trains on opposite tracks. A soul meets a on the bridge. A camel crosses states, continents, identities and ge A camel with its sacred burden, lurching and recovering its balance

Everyone's lurching right now.

I went to see the Leah Quinelle All Stars last night. They make me so happy, the way rock bands are supposed to make you happy but only very rarely do. I could add all the shows I went to as a teenager together, and not get the level of presence and exchange I get from these kids, who aren't kids really, but late-twenties aged tricksters out to do what most people have given up on, which is actually have fun. It's like they were inspired by some band only they could see, and just took the next logical steps from there. They taught themselves to play, then moved their stuff to Happy's mom's house in Iowa so they could tour for a year straight. Crazy, but very cute. Tonight the tour is wearing on them. They look like three teddy bears on coke, and the audience loves it. It's like they're some band only we can see, and we have a grave responsibility to keep the secret.

I come home to find China in her antique elevator operator's pillbox cap, cursing and trying to sew her white tutu with thick black thread. She's off kilter, drunkenly sawing the thread with her huge knife, then throwing it blade first into the floor like she usually does, but having it clatter instead of stick. I want her to be careful. She's like a burning log, turned so that the last edge of dry wood is starting to curl up under the flame. Easy, I tell her. Drink water.

China goes out that night and it's a bad night. She ends up stabbing garbage bags, throwing banana peels and whatever else clings across the sidewalk with a flick of the blade. Its 4 am. My sister and China's girlfriend Katie, who both live at the East Williamsburg punk house are with her. Katie's friend died a few days before in a bike accident in Boston. She is carrying two new helmets, still in their boxes.

"Fuck fuck fuck," China screams from the middle of the street. She's walking the yellow line like a tightrope while hammering her fists against the hoods of passing cars.

"I'm afraid China won't wear her helmet," Katie confesses.

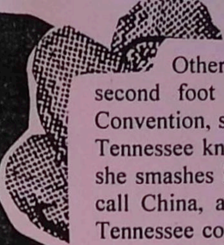
"Gee," my sister responds as China kicks a fender. "You think?"

Then the cops show up and my sister splits, something all three parties find funny. They take China's knife, which isn't funny, but they don't take her. I hear multiple versions of the story the next day.

"Bastard fuckers took my knife. That's bad karma. I hope it comes to get them."

"I'm glad the cops took her knife. She was stabbing things," my sister points out.

"Not people!" I argue. The incident, however depressing, is a point of humor back at the house. China gives up drinking for a while and we all try to pace ourselves.



Other things—the things we knew had to happen—-happen. The second foot falling, the axe descending, the Republican National Convention, summer. More glass gets broken, and yes, it is China's art. Tennessee knocks the lady with the pillbox hat out the window, where she smashes into dozens of pieces on the sidewalk. Tennessee doesn't call China, and he doesn't leave a note. But China knows. When Tennessee comes home the next day he finds our three remaining wine glasses smashed evenly all around his room. In his bed, on his desk, over his clothes and shoes. Him and China meet in the hallway and hug. It's even now, though for the next three months China can't hear about the bottle without getting steamed. And despite diligent cleanings, for that same period I'm called on twice a week to tweeze shards of glass from Tennessee's heels.

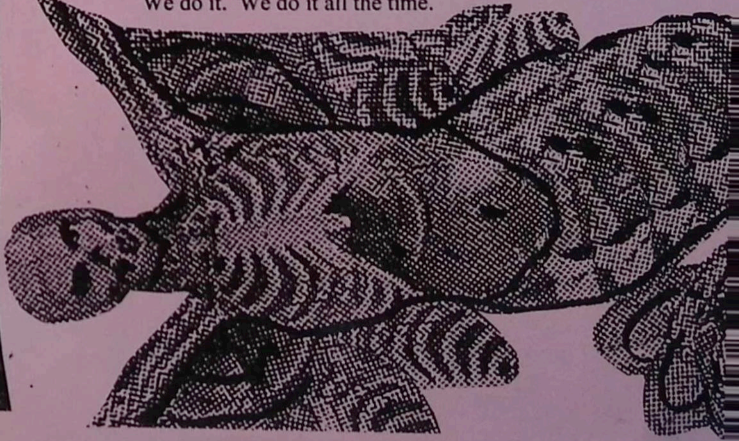
Tonight it was the soy sauce, knocked over by Chris while cooking. Lots of sharp, thick chunks clinking in a watery brown puddle. The glasses and mason jars are all gone by now, but the hefty soy sauce breaking still seems a little much.

"Do you think we have a ghost?" I ask.

"No," Chris says. He mops geometrically.

Every day is a refusal. Every day we try to get some distance back. Back to the bridge where souls and bodies find each other. To the truths of our persons, that calm spot burned clean by rage and starting, slowly, to grow green again. It will be ok, I think, if we just slow down and drink water. I think we'll all eventually be getting on a train, going home (leaving is different than arriving). Arriving? Because the ocean really does end at the hills, and vice versa. It would be easier if the path between was always a slope, never a cliff. But cliffs continually rise up to meet us or fall away beneath us, and we find a way across.

We do it. We do it all the time.



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